

Ellen Herman April 77

ROOT OF BITTERNESS

Documents of the Social History
of American Women

Edited, and with an introduction, by Nancy F. Cott

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A DUTTON PAPERBACK

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The education of association has but one *tone* in all its spheres. The family, the school, and society, all breathe kindred influences. In civilization, it is entirely the opposite. The training of home, of school, and of society or the world, are all discordant with each other, and it is impossible that one who has passed through them can, except in rare instances, have anything like unity or consistency of character, to say nothing of being really educated.

Diary and Letter of Mrs. Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer*

On the westward journey to Oregon, Mrs. Geer (then Mrs. Smith) wrote in her diary at the close of each day, after her eight children were asleep. Soon after her arrival in Oregon, she sent it in letter form to her friends back in La Porte, Indiana.

DIARY AND LETTER OF MRS. ELIZABETH DIXON SMITH GEER

Dear Friends—By your request I have endeavored to keep a record of our journey from “the States” to Oregon, though it is poorly done, owing to my having a young babe and besides a large family to do for; and, worst of all, my education is very limited.

April 21, 1847—Commenced our journey from La Porte, Indiana, to Oregon; made fourteen miles. . . .

[After six months of overland travel the party has reached the Columbia River.]

November 9—Finds us still in trouble. Waves dashing over our raft and we already stinting ourselves in provisions. My husband started this morning to hunt provisions. Left no man with us except our oldest boy. It is very cold. The icicles are hanging from our wagon beds to the water. Tonight about dusk Adam Polk expired. No one with him but his wife and myself. We sat up all night with him while the waves was dashing below.

November 10—Finds us still waiting for calm weather. My husband returned at 2 o'clock. Brought 50 pounds of beef on his back 12 miles, which he had bought from another company. By this time the water became calm and we started once more, but the wind soon began to blow and we were forced to land. My husband and boy were an hour and a half after dark getting the raft landed and made fast while the water ran knee deep over our raft, the wind blew, and was freezing cold. We women and children did not attempt to get out of our wagons tonight.

* From 35th *Transactions* of the Oregon Pioneer Association (1907), 153, 171-178.

November 11—Laid by most all day. Started this evening. Ran about three miles and landed after dark. Here we found Welch and our boys with our cattle, for they could be driven no farther on this side for mountains. Here was a ferry for the purpose of ferrying immigrants' cattle.

November 12—Ferried our cattle over the river and buried Mr. Polk. Rain all day. We are living entirely on beef.

November 18—My husband is sick. It rains and snows. We start this morning around the falls with our wagons. We have 5 miles to go. I carry my babe and lead, or rather carry, another through snow, mud and water, almost to my knees. It is the worst road that a team could possibly travel. I went ahead with my children and I was afraid to look behind me for fear of seeing the wagons turn over into the mud and water with everything in them. My children gave out with cold and fatigue and could not travel, and the boys had to unhitch the oxen and bring them and carry the children on to camp. I was so cold and numb that I could not tell by the feeling that I had any feet at all. We started this morning at sunrise and did not get to camp until after dark, and there was not one dry thread on one of us—not even my babe. I had carried my babe and I was so fatigued that I could scarcely speak or step. When I got here I found my husband lying in Welch's wagon, very sick. He had brought Mrs. Polk down the day before and was taken sick here. We had to stay up all night tonight for our wagons are left half-way back. I have not told half we suffered. I am not adequate to the task. Here was some hundreds camped, waiting for boats to come and take them down the Columbia to Vancouver or Portland or Oregon City.

November 19—My husband is sick and can have but little care. Rain all day.

November 20—Rain all day. It is almost an impossibility to cook, and quite so to keep warm or dry. I froze or chilled my feet so that I cannot wear a shoe, so I have to go around in the cold water barefooted.

November 21—Rain all day. The whole care of everything falls upon my shoulders. I cannot write any more at present.

November 27—Embarked once more on the Columbia on a flatboat. Ran all day, though the waves threatened hard to sink us. Passed Fort Vancouver in the night. Landed a mile below. My husband never has left his bed since he was taken sick.

November 28—Still moving on the water.

November 29—Landed at Portland on the Willamette, 12 miles above the mouth, at 11 o'clock at night.

November 30—Raining. This morning I ran about trying to get a house to get into with my sick husband. At last I found a small, leaky concern, with two families already in it. Mrs. Polk had got down before us. She and another widow was in this house. My family and Welch's went in with them, and you could have stirred us with a stick. Welch and my oldest boy was driving the cattle around. My children and I carried up a bed. The distance was nearly a quarter of a mile. Made it down on the floor in the mud. I got some men to carry my husband up through the rain and lay him on it, and he never was out of that shed until he was carried out in his coffin. Here lay five of us bedfast at one time . . . and we had no money, and what few things we had left that would bring money, I had to sell. I had to give 10 cents a pound for fresh pork, 75 cents per bushel for potatoes, 4 cents a pound for fish. There are so many of us sick that I cannot write any more at present. I have not time to write much, but I thought it would be interesting to know what kind of weather we have in the winter.

1848—January 14—Rain this morning. Warm weather. We suppose it has rained half of the time that I have neglected writing.

January 15—My husband is still alive, but very sick. There is no medicine here except at Fort Vancouver, and the people there will not sell one bit—not even a bottle of wine.

January 16—Warm and dry. We are still living in the old, leaky shed in Portland. It is six miles below Vancouver, down the Columbia and 12 miles up the Willamette. Portland has two white houses and one brick and three wood-colored frame houses and a few cabins. . . .

January 20—Cool and dry. Soldiers are collecting here from every part of Oregon to go and fight the Indians in middle Oregon in consequence of the massacre at Whitman's mission. I think there were 17 men killed at the massacre, but no women or children, except Whitman's wife.¹ They killed every white man there except one, and he was an Englishman. They took all the young women for wives. Robbed them of their clothing and everything. The Oregon government bought the prisoners at a dear rate, and then gave the Indians fight; but one white man, I believe, was killed in the war, and not many Indians. The murderers escaped. . . .

¹ Narcissa Whitman was killed by Indians in 1847. —Ed.

January 31—Rain all day. If I could tell you how we suffer you would not believe it. Our house, or rather a shed joined to a house, leaks all over. The roof descends in such a manner as to make the rain run right down into the fire. I have dipped as much as six pails of water off of our dirt hearth in one night. Here I sit up, night after night, with my poor sick husband, all alone, and expecting him every day to die. I neglected to tell you that Welch's and all the rest moved off and left us. Mr. Smith has not been moved off his bed for six weeks only by lifting him by each corner of the sheet, and I had hard work to get help enough for that, let alone getting watchers. I have not undressed to lie down for six weeks. Besides all our sickness, I had a cross little babe to take care of. Indeed, I cannot tell you half.

February 1—Rain all day. This day my dear husband, my last remaining friend, died.

February 2—Today we buried my earthly companion. Now I know what none but widows know; that is, how comfortless is that of a widow's life, especially when left in a strange land, without money or friends, and the care of seven children. Cloudy. . . .

Butteville, Oregon Territory, Yamhill County, September 2, 1850
Dear and Estimable Friends, Mrs. Paulina Foster and Mrs. Cynthia Ames:

I promised when I saw you last to write to you when I got to Oregon, and I done it faithfully, but as I never have received an answer, I do not know whether you got my letter and diary or not, consequently I do not know what to write now. I wrote four sheets full and sent it to you, but now I have not time to write. I write now to know whether you got my letter; and I will try to state a few things again. My husband was taken sick before we got to any settlement, and never was able to walk afterwards. He died at Portland, on the Willamette River, after an illness of two months. I will not attempt to describe my troubles since I saw you. Suffice it to say that I was left a widow with the care of seven children in a foreign land, without one solitary friend, as one might say, in the land of the living; but this time I will only endeavor to hold up the bright side of the picture. I lived a widow one year and four months. My three boys started for the gold mines, and it was doubtful to me whether I ever saw them again. Perhaps you will think it strange that I let such young boys go; but I was willing and helped them off in as good

style as I could. They packed through by land. Russell Welch went by water. The boys never saw Russell in the mines. Well, after the boys were gone, it is true I had plenty of cows and hogs and plenty of wheat to feed them on and to make my bread. Indeed, I was well off if I had only known it; but I lived in a remote place where my strength was of little use to me. I could get nothing to do, and you know I could not live without work. I employed myself in teaching my children: yet that did not fully occupy my mind. I became as poor as a snake, yet I was in good health, and never was so nimble since I was a child. I could run a half a mile without stopping to breathe. Well, I thought perhaps I had better try my fortune again; so on the 24th of June, 1849, I was married to a Mr. Joseph Geer, a man 14 years older than myself, though young enough for me. He is the father of ten children. They are all married, but two boys and two girls. He is a Yankee from Connecticut and he is a Yankee in every sense of the word, as I told you he would be if it ever proved my lot to marry again. I did not marry rich, but my husband is very industrious, and is as kind to me as I can ask. Indeed, he sometimes provokes me for trying to humor me so much. He is a stout, healthy man for one of his age.

. . . At this time we are all well but Perley. I cannot answer for him; he has gone to the Umpqua for some money due him. The other two are working for four dollars a day. The two oldest boys have got three town lots in quite a stirring place called Lafayette in Yamhill County. Perley has four horses. A good Indian horse is worth one hundred dollars. A good American cow is worth sixty dollars. My boys live about 25 miles from me, so that I cannot act in the capacity of a mother to them; so you will guess it is not all sunshine with me, for you know my boys are not old enough to do without a mother. Russell Welch done very well in the mines. He made about twenty hundred dollars. He lives 30 miles below me in a little town called Portland on the Willamette River. Sarah has got her third son. It has been one year since I saw her. Adam Polk's two youngest boys live about wherever they see fit. The oldest, if he is alive, is in California. There is some ague in this country this season, but neither I nor my children, except those that went to California, have had a day's sickness since we came to Oregon.

I believe I will say no more until I hear from you. Write as soon as possible and tell me everything. My husband will close this epistle.

Elizabeth Geer